

[By Neal Goswami](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch says he is leaving no stone unturned in his quest to secure Senate-passed disaster relief funds to help Vermont rebuild following Tropical Storm Irene.

Cost downgraded, but ...

Vermont officials initially thought road repairs required after the Aug. 28 storm and flooding would cost about \$600 million. The cost has since been significantly downgraded to be between \$175 million and \$250 million. That still presents a serious budget challenge for the state, though, based on laws currently on the books regarding federal reimbursement.

In many cases, including a Route 9 bridge in Woodford, temporary fixes have been put in place to allow traffic to flow, but more costly long-term repairs must still be made.

Welch, a Democrat, said he is pushing House leaders in both parties to accept language in the Senate version, secured by Vermont Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy, that will aid states struck particularly hard the storm.

The Senate bill, which was approved on Tuesday, includes \$1.9 billion to replenish the nearly depleted Federal Highway Administration emergency fund. Supporters of the measure say Vermont and other states are depending on the cash infusion to repair and rebuild roads that were washed out or damaged during the storm.

The Senate bill also includes several cost-waiver provisions added by Leahy that will could save Vermont millions of state tax dollars.

Among the provisions:

- \* Reimbursement for more than the current \$100 million per-state cap on federal emergency highway repair funds

- \* 100 percent reimbursement for permanent repairs if total damage is more than double the state's annual federal highway funding

- \* Reimbursement for 100 percent of emergency repairs beyond the current limit of 180 days

"Sen. Leahy's success gives us a fighting chance in the House, but we've got a real fight in the House," Welch said in a telephone interview Thursday.

The House has passed three separate appropriations bills that were wrapped up into one in the Senate. The House-approved measures include no emergency disaster relief, though, Welch said. The two chambers will look to bridge the gap between their respective bills in conference committee.

"There's nothing in the House bill on the disaster relief," he said. "My goal is to get in the House bill what Sen. Leahy got in the Senate bill."

To that end, Welch said he has met with House Speaker John Boehner and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, among others, on the Republican side. He's also counting on a bipartisan Irene Coalition to help convince majority Republicans that the funding is vital to Vermont and other states.

"The bipartisan approach on this, I think, has been very helpful in building a head of steam. So, that's the secret weapon," he said.

Significant challenges remain, though. Welch said meetings with GOP leaders have been "very

cordial and positive." But a significant number of House Republicans are looking to "impose budget views on a disaster situation." Some are seeking offsetting budget cuts in order to pass the disaster funding.

"There's a significant members of the House that will cut anything at any time for any reason," Welch said. "We've traditionally not had offsets when the river is rising or the house is burning."

Welch said the Senate aid package also includes help for farmers that he is seeking support for in the House.